SOMETHING HARD

The Life of Elizabeth Blackwell, M.D., The First Woman Doctor, 1821—1910

No. 119

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MADE IN GREAT BRITAIN

1. Introduction

"Educated African women are increasingly asking for professional careers." During the War African women took their part in war-work, in first-aid and in nursing. They have worked under women doctors and take it for granted that the career of medicine is open to women—women who have the necessary education. I wonder if they realize the great battle that was fought and won in the West before the doctor's profession was open to women. The women who won the battle had to fight every inch of the way, against bitter opposition and against ridicule as well as against their own insufficient education. Only a hundred years ago in America and in Europe, a girl was not expected to work away from home. It was only in sad cases when a girl from a good home was left penniless, that she was forced to take to teaching. Such girls never went to nurse until Florence Nightingale led the way. She started a movement in every country to train educated girls as nurses. The idea of women doctors came as a shock even to the minds of reformers.

2. Early Life

"I don't know what I'm going to be, but I think it will be something hard," said a little girl of six as she heard her elder sisters planning what they would like to do when grown-up. A thin little girl of ten left her warm bed and slept on the hard floor—to harden her body and to punish herself for her sins. This was Elizabeth Blackwell in 1831.

She was an odd child, full of character and determination. She had an unusual up-bringing for those days. Her father was a successful business man and a great reformer. He had a sugar factory in Bristol. His trade had naturally interested him in the question

of slave labour, and he gave active support to the law that stopped the slave trade to America in 1807. He was equally distressed over the bad conditions among workmen in his own country. He held strong views on the education of women, believing that boys and girls should have the same kind of education. He carried out this idea in his own family.

"What's the use of the girls learning History and Mathematics and Latin and Greek?" people asked. "What will they do?"

"They shall do what they please," he replied, but he did not realize how difficult that would be.

When Elizabeth was eleven, the Blackwell family left England and settled in New York. It was hard for Mr. Blackwell, with nine children, to start his business again in a new country. They never had as comfortable a home as they had had in England. The girls grew up full of ambition. Anna, the eldest, wanted to be a writer. Elizabeth, the third, was restless and unsettled. She taught the younger children, but she knew this was not the work she wanted to do. Her father died when she was seventeen, and there was very little money left. The three elder daughters started a day-school for girls in their own home. The elder boy, only sixteen, got work as a clerk and soon found a job for the younger. The boys did well and after a few years persuaded their sisters to give up the school. Elizabeth was still restless; she could not settle down to home life. She did not like teaching, but rather than do nothing she took a post as schoolmistress in a little country town.

In 1845, she was helping to nurse a very sick friend. One day this friend said to her, "You are fond of study and have health and leisure. Why not study medicine? If I could have been treated by a woman, my worst sufferings would have been spared me." Elizabeth

was startled. She had never been interested in the body or medicine. She said she would not think about it; yet she did think about it, and she spoke about it to her family and friends. The idea horrified the family doctor: no lady could possibly undertake such work. Opposition only made Elizabeth more determined. Here at last was a "hard" thing to do. She asked advice from an old friend, a business man. To her surprise he encouraged her, "I do wish you would take the matter up," he said, "if you have the courage; and you have the courage, I know."

The cost of the new venture would be great. To earn money Elizabeth went away to teach in a school where she could also get lessons herself in physics, chemistry, and anatomy. Her brothers were enthusiastic and tried to help her in every way. Her first teacher found her a good pupil, and introduced her to a well-known doctor who could teach her still more.

She now wished to get into a medical school where she could qualify as a doctor. She wrote to all her friends to ask if any could help her. One, a good Christian doctor, who was already training nurses in his own house, gave her much help but even he was discouraging: "It is appropriate that man be the physician and woman the nurse," he said.

In 1845 she went to Philadelphia. She lived with the wife of a doctor, who taught her himself. He arranged for her to have practical lessons in anatomy in a laboratory. "You give me courage," said Elizabeth. "I would say, Madam, that this is not a quality in which you are lacking! Though you might as well lead a revolution as try to become a doctor," was his comment.

Even buying the necessary instruments was difficult. "Perhaps Madam fancies herself a doctor!" said a student watching scornfully. Elizabeth looked up. "Not yet," she said quietly.

She applied to the colleges for admission but everywhere met with cold refusals. "I know of no country where such a request has been made or granted." . . . "The gentlemen would find it most disquieting to have a woman present." . . . "I must earnestly advise you to give up these unnatural ambitions." These were some of the remarks made. She tried college after college, everywhere was the same. She wrote to the smaller medical schools all over America. The result was the same. At last she went home for a holiday, exhausted. Her younger sister, Emily, wished to follow Elizabeth, but as Elizabeth said, "Wait until I have done better than bump my head!"

The school term had already begun. A small medical college at Geneva, in the north of America, agreed to take her. She could hardly believe it, but at once packed her things and went.

3. Medical Student

The letter had been polite and her hopes were high. When she got to Geneva, her first difficulty was to find rooms in which to live. No landlady would take her in. The news had spread that a woman was entering the college, and even the little street boys ran after her calling out, "Doctor in petticoats!" Elizabeth wrote to her sister, "The theory was established that either I was a bad woman . . . or insane." At last she found a strong-minded Scotch woman whom she persuaded to take her in.

When she went to the college, she felt at once that she was not wanted. No one helped her, she had no books, no time-table. On her fourth day, however, the Head of the college made a short speech to the students and himself took her to her first class. By the end of the day she had forgotten her discomfort in the interest in the work.

The Professor of Anatomy had been away when she arrived. When he returned she found in him her first friend. "So this is the daring young woman! Capital!" he said, "We'll give you the opportunities. You'll make a stir, I can tell you!"

In the town she still caused many comments. It was unusual for a woman to walk out alone. To avoid criticism she only went from her rooms to the college and back. The students soon got used to her. "Blackwell," they called her as if she were a man, and Elizabeth felt she had what she needed—equal treatment.

At the end of the first year's course the students went into hospitals for practical work. On the advice of her Professor, Elizabeth applied for admission to a big Hospital for the Poor in Philadelphia. "No, madam, no! For your own good . . . I must tell you that it is impossible. The worst criminals are here . . .how can I suggest that any woman well brought up and well trained should be exposed to such an atmosphere," said the Director. "But I am trained as a physician," protested Elizabeth. "What these people are doesn't matter to me: what matters to me is that they are ill and that, working here like any other medical student, I may gain the experience to help them." Once more, as with her Scots landlady, Elizabeth persisted and, by her understanding of the man's character, won him over. She was given permission to come.

The experience was indeed hard. The patients were suspicious. One old woman refused to let her come near. "I may be poor . . . . but I'll have no such woman to take care of me in my illness," she said. A little gift of jelly, a little patience, and Elizabeth had won her confidence. The other student doctors made difficulties for her. As she walked into a ward

they walked out and removed even the charts giving the history of the patients. Conditions were bad. The place was built like a prison; there was no proper ventilation; patients went unwashed; nurses were rough and unkind. "All this is horrible," wrote Elizabeth to her mother. "Women must open their eyes to it!"

Late in the summer there was an outbreak of what was called "Ship-Fever," which we call Typhus. It was brought by the immigrant ships. Beds were full, extra beds were put up in passages. Students, doctors, nurses worked day and night. There was no time for distinctions, and Elizabeth forgot her loneliness in the endless toil.

Before leaving, every student had to write a paper on some disease seen during the practical work. Elizabeth wrote on Typhus. No one really knew the cause; no one knew the cure. She made notes of her cases and wrote a careful report of her experiences. The head doctor asked her to come to his room to read it to the other students. After a few words of praise from him, she read out her work. The men forgot their opposition; they treated her as one of themselves, and discussed her conclusions with friendly interest. One young man who had led the opposition came to her and said, "Forgive me, Dr. Blackwell, I feel certain you will some day make a fine physician."

Her last months at Geneva were very happy. She was accepted by her fellow students as "an elder sister"; she had won the respect of students and professors. She passed the final examination, but the authorities hesitated to give a diploma to a woman. Her Professor persuaded and threatened them and she received her certificate with the other students. Her brother, full of pride in her success, was present

for the occasion. He wrote home a full account: "Our Sis came off with flying colours and the reputation of being quite the leader of the class." When presented with the certificate she replied with dignity, "Sir, I thank you. By the help of the Most High it shall be the effort of my life to shed honour upon your diploma." This promise she was to fulfil in after years.

Surgery was the work that interested her most, and she felt the need for much wider experience. Her elder sister was now a journalist in France. Elizabeth's medical friends advised her to try to study in Paris. She gladly accepted the offer of a cousin visiting America, to take her back to England with him. Thus after three happy weeks in England she arrived in Paris in 1849, as she said, "With a map in my hand and hope in my heart."

4. Struggle in Paris

Much to her disappointment, the struggle began all over again in Paris, which was then famous for its doctors and medical schools. No school or college would recognize her certificate. She wished to be admitted for a course in surgery in one of the big Paris hospitals. But the French doctors did not believe it possible for a woman to be a doctor. The only course open to her as a woman was that of student nurse or midwife in the big hospital for women, where she must begin on the same level as any peasant girl. Elizabeth decided to do this. "What does it matter that I shall make beds and wash babies?" she said to her indignant sister. "I shall have my eyes to see with."

Conditions in the hospital were certainly hard. As a nurse she was not allowed outside the walls for four months. The hours were long, there was no

provision for sleep for those who were on duty at night, there was no privacy. But she wrote, "The medical experience was invaluable."

The patients soon began to notice the difference in the "English Miss," she was "almost as good as a doctor." Elizabeth never spoke of her past history, and the chief midwife was surprised at her knowledge and came to rely upon her. The Assistant Director also discovered her. "You know a great deal more than the others," he said, and he began to lend her books and give her opportunities for learning more. Before the end of her course the Director suggested that she should take the full two-years' course as a midwife. "But," said she, "I am already a graduate of an American School of Medicine." The Director waved that aside; the Paris qualification would be much better. She urged that surgery was what she wanted. This he still considered madness, but he allowed her to attend in the operating theatre.

During her last month an accident happened which altered all her plans. Her eye became infected from a child with ophthalmia. She was very tired and the poison spread over her whole body. Her friend the Assistant Director attended her every night and day. They saved her life and the sight of one eye, but surgery was now out of the question. Her illness seemed to have made her reputation. The Director came to visit her and to offer any help he could give, when once she had fully recovered. "I wish you all success," he said, "but you have chosen a hard way—a very hard way for a woman."

When she came back to Paris to work, she found an invitation from England. Some friends had spoken on her behalf, and St Bartholomew's Hospital, London, invited her to come as a graduate student to the Hospital. Gladly she accepted the invitation.

In London she was given a warm welcome and made many friends. One friend was Florence Nightingale, who was trying, in the face of both family and public opposition, to organize the training of educated girls for nursing. They had much in common, and Elizabeth always said that she owed to Miss Nightingale her belief in the importance of "sanitation," or hygiene, and home training. Her English friends wanted her to practise as a doctor in London. Her sister Emily had overcome even greater difficulties than Elizabeth; she was now studying in an American medical college, and after two years away from home, Elizabeth decided to return to America.

5. Struggle in New York

Once again Elizabeth had to face a wall of opposition. She wished to start work in New York, but no one would let her have rooms. A woman could not be a doctor. This was the opinion of all the landladies. At last she found a room, but she was not allowed to put a notice on the door to say that it was a doctor's consulting room. Fortunately a friend who was an editor put a paragraph in his paper: "Miss E. Blackwell, M.D., has returned to this city from a two years residence abroad, which she has spent at the Hospital of La Maternité in Paris and at St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London. She has opened an office at 44 University Place and is prepared to practise in every part of her profession." The paper was popular, and letters of enquiry began to come in.

Other doctors looked upon her with great suspicion. She offered her services at a city dispensary, but was told to open her own dispensary.

In 1852, she gave a course of lectures to women on

the "Physical Education of Girls." These were so popular that she afterwards published them as a book. Among the women who came to hear her, she found friends to help her in opening a small dispensary in a poor part of the town. It was opened in 1853 for women and children, organized by women and served by women. At first no one came. Elizabeth sat with the door open waiting for curiosity to bring the first patients, and before long it became a centre not only for treating the sick but also for giving guidance in homemaking and cleanliness and for giving help to the poor and friendless. Elizabeth also visited patients in their homes. On her rounds at night she had, as she said, "unpleasant annoyances" but no "serious difficulties." Unkind stories there were of which she took no notice. "I am glad," she wrote to Emily, "that I and not another have to bear this pioneer work."

Emily had qualified as a doctor and had gone to Europe for further experience in surgery. A German student was sent to Elizabeth for advice and Elizabeth managed to send her to the medical college where Emily had been.

Elizabeth was now 33. "The utter loneliness of life became intolerable," she wrote in 1854, and she adopted a child from an orphanage. The little girl, Kitty, brought her great and lasting happiness.

The dispensary had to be closed for lack of funds, but Elizabeth was undaunted. She was full of plans for a women's hospital and medical school. Her own and her sister's experience convinced her that both men and women would profit by learning and working together, but the need for women doctors and the difficulties put in their way, persuaded her that their only hope lay in having their own medical college staffed by women. She was determined that it should

give a thorough training and she aimed at a four year course. (One or two small medical schools had already been opened for women, but only elementary instruction was given.)

She shared all her plans with Emily, who was often frightened by her sister's great schemes. "What's the good of half measures?" said Elizabeth. "When a thing has to be done, it has to be done." She obtained Government permission to open a women's hospital. Money had to be raised. She bought a suitable building—"to give helpers something to work for." She addressed meetings, she organized sales, and her enthusiasm fired others.

In 1857 the Hospital was opened: "The New York Infirmary for Women and Children." It had two wards, each with eight beds. Three women doctors were available. The young German was made resident doctor with Emily as surgeon, Elizabeth also helping. Medical men could now be found willing to give advice. Nurses were needed, and Elizabeth thought of her friend Florence Nightingale and started a course for student nurses with four pupils.

There were difficult times. The first time a patient died, the friends accused the doctors of murder and a mob nearly stormed the Hospital. A male doctor was called in who assured the relations that everything possible had been done to save the patient's life, and the storm died down. But when later another patient died, again the doors were attacked by an angry crowd. Happily a powerful policeman took command. He had been one of Elizabeth's patients: "Only the Lord has the power of life and death," he urged, and he told the people how Elizabeth had saved his life. Then another man stood out and told how she had saved his child. The riot was checked.

Emily was a good organizer. "What Elizabeth

begins, Emily carries on," had been a family saying. The work went ahead and grew. When English friends asked Elizabeth to come to London and help them start a women's hospital there, she left Emily in charge and went.

In England she spent a busy year lecturing. She was the first woman to be entered on the Register of Doctors in Great Britain. She returned to America the next year, when America was torn by civil war over the question of slavery. The Blackwells had always been keen supporters of the abolition of slavery but, "Suffering does not take sides," said Elizabeth, and refugees from North and South, black and white, were treated alike.

Through all the years of war, the plans for the Women's Medical College were taking shape. In 1864 the scheme was approved by Government, and the College opened with fifteen students. It was a four years' course. Elizabeth's great desire was achieved. There was a professor of Hygiene and Preventive Medicine—this was Elizabeth's post.

Both Hospital and College were working smoothly: more important still, Elizabeth could write, "Throughout the Northern States the free and equal entrance of women to the profession of Medicine has been secured." The tireless Elizabeth looked round for fresh tasks.

6. Struggle in London

Elizabeth had always felt at home in England. She now returned to London to help in the struggle there.

In 1870 she undertook some lectures to working women on "How to keep a Household in Health." She gave very simple, sound advice. She roused fierce criticism and opposition. In another course on "The Religion of Health," she showed that sun-

shine, good food, and freedom from worry were better than medicine and doctors. Everywhere she went, she urged the need for the prevention of illness, and in 1871 the "National Health Society" was formed with its motto, "Prevention is better than Cure."

Elizabeth was tired, but she felt she was needed. A group of English women doctors, old students of her own, started a dispensary, then a hospital. They wanted her to help to raise funds, to speak at their meetings. When at last the London School of Medicine for Women was opened, she became a lecturer. Her world-wide reputation attracted many students. Her teaching always emphasized the responsibility that was now placed in the hands of women: "You are trusted with human lives!" "Remember that your patients are human beings, not cases."

She had always been deeply conscious of the religious side of her work. In spite of all the opposition she met, she kept "her charm and kindly manner." As an old woman she still looked with high hopes "to the future influence of Christian women physicians."

In America, in England the battle had been fought and won. Younger women had taken over the work she had started. "You have left plenty for the younger generation to do, but you have shown the way," wrote a young woman doctor to her in 1908. "The Light that lighteth every man which cometh into the world has made you a light to others, and we rejoice that . . . we are moving to more and more light."

Elizabeth Blackwell died in Scotland in 1910.

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